

You Are Not Alone

Human resources at small co-ops

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Is your co-op too small to have a human resources manager on staff? Is the HR function in your co-op divided up among different people? Have your HR systems been cobbled together from different sources? You are not alone!

There are many smaller co-ops that are simply not large enough organizations to justify the labor expense of an HR specialist. Administration of HR doesn't necessarily have to be done by one individual. However, when using a team approach, it's a good practice to periodically review your systems to ensure that they are keeping up with your organization.

To be sure your HR practices are providing the appropriate foundation to support your workplace culture, consider conducting an internal review of your HR systems. While the HR systems you have in place may have been adequate when they were set up, as co-ops evolve over time, so must their internal systems.

Begin by taking a look at the following fundamental aspects of your human resources systems, with a focus on the details that will help to ensure the success of your employees. Pay attention to legality, clarity, fairness, and ease of administration.

Personnel policy handbook

Your co-op's personnel policy handbook is an important resource and tool. The handbook contains all the policies that staff members are accountable to. It provides a way for all staff

members to easily access this information and should be seen as a tool for everyone in your co-op to use. Policy handbooks contain guidelines for employees and for management.

When conducting a review of your policy handbook, be sure it includes:

- grievance policy
- policy regarding benefits
- behavior policies
- personnel file review policy
- policy on exempt/non-exempt status
- overtime and termination policies
- "at-will employment" statement, subject to the laws of your state.

Keep in mind: handbooks are not meant to be exhaustive of all possible scenarios, and they are only truly effective when they are kept updated! Be sure you have a procedure in place for updating your handbook, and keep records of those updates. Lastly, all employees should

sign a handbook acknowledgement form when they receive their copy. This signed form should be included in the employee's personnel file.

Consistent enforcement

One important reason businesses choose to have policy handbooks in place is to help ensure consistency throughout the organization. This can be especially helpful in small co-ops where there is not an HR specialist on staff. When all members of the leadership team are aligned through the policies, it fosters a culture of fairness in the workplace. It is important to ensure that all managers/supervisors in your co-op are aware of their responsibility for enforcement of policy.

If you find that certain policies are not being consistently enforced, it may be time to review those policies with your leadership team for potential revision or deletion. Remember that your handbook should evolve over time along with your co-op. It is a good practice to ►

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◀ review it at least every three years. Note: any changes to policies should be reviewed by your co-op's attorney to ensure their legality.

Hiring

Your hiring practices can make or break your co-op. Why not review your systems for hiring to ensure they are the best that they can be? Here are some key areas to examine:

Job postings, advertising: Be sure your advertising really sells your co-op as a great place to work. Your job postings should be reflective of your workplace culture. They should be eye-catching and fun. They should include important information such as, "Must be available evenings and weekends."

Consider where you are advertising, too. Mix it up from time to time, and try a new publication or online avenue. You might find a new source of candidates.

Don't forget about your policy on internal postings; to maintain good morale, it is important to operate within that policy. It is a good practice to post all openings and have information and internal applications available for staff members who might be interested. Also, encourage your current staff members to tell their friends and colleagues about openings—they can be a great source of advertising for you!

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Screening: Save yourself valuable time by using an appropriate process for candidate screening. Read each application carefully to ensure that the candidates meet your requirements. Ask yourself the following questions: Are they available during the hours you need them to work? Are they able to make a reasonable commitment to your co-op? Did they fill out the application completely and neatly? Do they have the skills and/or experience you are looking for? Give candidates a call and ask them a few brief questions over the phone to get a feel for whether they might be a good fit for the position.

Interviews: I strongly encourage co-ops to develop interview guides for each position. They might be the handiest tool you can add to your HR toolkit. Start with those positions that you hire for frequently, such as cashiers and stockers. Pull your questions together and create an interview folder that managers can access easily. You might include a scoring component for positions above entry level on your wage scale. Scoring each candidate can really help when it comes time to make hiring

decisions.

Use behavioral interview questions that ask candidates to describe actual experiences and situations rather than theorize. Be sure to consider motivational fit—that is, what motivates them to apply for the position? Does this position offer what the candidate is looking for in a job? Cultural fit is also important. Will this person fit well into your organizational culture?

Whenever possible, have two employees conduct the interview—it is valuable to get two opinions on the candidates and to be able to talk throughout the hiring process about which candidate will be the best fit for the position. Always hire the best candidate for every position, and be patient. Even if it takes longer than you expect to find the right person, don't rush into a hiring decision—nine times out of ten, you will end up regretting it!

Orientation

How you welcome your new employees will set the tone for their employment experience. Be sure your orientation process is organized and structured.

Provide your newly hired employees with the information they need to be successful at your co-op. Include information such as where to find freebies, where to keep their backpacks

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and outerwear, how to get a new nametag if theirs is lost, etc. This will help them to feel more comfortable during those first few days. Introduce them to as many co-workers as you can while giving them a tour of your store. This offers your staff members the opportunity to welcome them and learn their name and what department they will work in and can ease some of the stress for the new employee. Remember that starting a new job is difficult for most people. Do your best to help their transition be smooth.

Training

If you don't provide consistent, thorough training, how will you hold your staff members accountable? Training checklists are a must. Each position should have one, as well as a training outline that is used for each new hire. Even better is to have a manual in each department that lays out all the responsibilities and expectations; staff members can use the manual as a reference, and trainers can use it as a tool. Without training checklists, it's difficult to ensure that all new hires receive the same information during training. Be sure that employees sign the checklist once training is completed and that it goes into their personnel files.

The method by which you train is also

important. Be sure to offer training for a variety of learning styles. Check in with new hires as they begin their training and ask them what their learning style is. For example, if you have a hands-on learner, let them learn by doing. Assigning designated trainers in each department can be very valuable (even crucial). "Train your trainers" to ensure they are providing content that reflects your co-op's commitment to excellence. Give your new employees peace of mind by letting them know it's okay to say, "I don't know," as long as this is followed by, "Let me find out for you."

Performance evaluations

One of the key ways you communicate to your employees about their work is through performance evaluations. To ensure your system has kept up with organizational growth and change, take a look at each evaluation form and see that it matches the current job description for the position. As important as the process itself is the management of the schedule. Do not underestimate the importance to your employees of "on time" evaluations. Check the review schedule monthly to see that evaluations have been completed or are in process as scheduled. ►



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◀ Hold those responsible accountable for getting evaluations completed on time.

Consider offering training for those in your organization who conduct evaluations. This will help to ensure that your employees are getting fair, constructive, useful evaluations that provide them with both feedback and goals to work toward. Take the time to review the evaluation forms with department managers. This allows all managers some input and ensures consistency as to process and how evaluations are handled. Remember, too, that evaluations are not the place for corrective action. If an employee is not meeting expectations, don't put off talking about it until evaluation time. Performance problems should be handled as they arise.

Recordkeeping

Recordkeeping is an area of utmost importance to every organization, regardless of size. Having complete personnel files for each of your employees is one of your legal responsibilities as an employer. Having well-organized files can be a real benefit and is fairly easily achieved with a little time and energy.

A three-folder method is one way to keep your files organized and accessible. In each file:

- one folder contains general documents such as application forms, handbook

acknowledgement forms, and emergency contact information;

- the second is the review folder and contains information and documents related to employee performance;
- the third is the payroll file and includes the W-4 form and any pay-related documents.

All medical information and forms (including worker's compensation information) should be kept in a separate medical file, and all I-9 forms should be together in a binder.

All these files should be kept in a locked cabinet, and only designated staff members should have access. It's a good practice to have a record-retention policy in place and to purge your files periodically of those that are past their retention date. If you have questions, your state's department of employment and economic development should have information and resources available on their website.

Lastly, take a walk through your employee break room and ensure that you have all the required (and current) Employment Law Posters hung in a visible place. These should be checked annually. This web page will assist you in determining which posters are required for your co-op: www.dol.gov/elaws/posters.htm.

Reviewing your HR systems can shed light on areas that need improvement as well as

RESOURCES

Use the resources that are available, and seek advice from your co-op's attorney if you are uncertain.

Your state's Department of Labor website and the Department of Employment and Economic Development are great resources; your insurance administrator, your health insurance company website, and the following websites are also helpful:

www.shrm.org/Pages/default.aspx

www.flssa.com/coverage.html

www.osha.gov

www.dol.gov

provide peace of mind that your systems are solid. Take one piece at a time, and move through the various aspects of your human resources function with those who are involved in the management of each area. For more on the benefits of an HR audit for your organization, see this recent article by Carolee Colter: www.cooperativegrocer.coop/articles/2012-08-07/why-human-resources-audit. ■



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